Is the Internet Politics as Usual or Democracy's Future?

Candidate Campaign Web Sites in the 2001 Alberta and British Columbia Provincial Elections

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The 1990s witnessed the beginning of an important revolution in communications technology. The Internet went from being the haven of computer experts, academics, and researchers to a mainstream medium. Through events such as the release of the Starr report on American President Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky and NASA's Mars Pathfinder mission, the Internet took its place alongside television, radio, and the press as a medium of mass communication. As more and more citizens flocked on-line, dramatically increasing Internet traffic, established media organizations, businesses, private organizations and individuals rushed to establish an Internet presence. Political actors joined the rush to get on-line. Government agencies and departments established web sites explaining government programs and increasingly provided services on-line. Legislatures began to post information about their activities, including the text of bills and Hansard on-line. Political parties and candidates launched web sites to assist their campaigns.

The mainstreaming of the Internet has sparked a lively debate among political analysts about the implications of this communications revolution for the political system. Some argue that the Internet has the potential to transform the democratic process in significant ways, making citizen involvement more egalitarian, informed, and participatory. Others are more sanguine about the impact of the Internet on the political process, arguing that it will be politics as usual, simply played out in a new media arena. Much of the early debate was theoretical; only recently have there been empirical studies of the way political actors are actually using the Internet. This study seeks to contribute some empirical evidence to the debate through an analysis of the campaign web sites of candidates in the 2001 provincial elections in Alberta and British Columbia.

Cyber-optimists and Cyber-pessimists: The debate over the political impact of the Internet
Because democratic politics is founded largely on the process of persuasion, communication is central to its conduct. Hence, a change in communications medium can have profound implications for the nature and character of the political process and debate. For example, Ken Carty's (1988) classic analysis of the three Canadian party systems (later extended to four systems by Carty, Cross, and Young (2000, chapter 9)) links the changes in communications technology to changes in the Canadian national party system. In his analysis, the development of radio coincided with a change from a local to a regional party focus, while the emergence of television helped to make Canadian politics more national and more leader-driven than before.

Similarly, the expanded use of the Internet has led to speculation about its implications for the political process. While a detailed review of the literature on cyber-politics is beyond the scope of this analysis,[i1] we can note that much of the early literature on the impact of the Internet on the political process was highly optimistic. Typical of the cyber-optimist perspective is Howard

Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (1993). Arguing that the established "mass media … have commoditized the public sphere, substituting slick public relations for genuine political debate," Rheingold argues that the Internet has the potential "to challenge the existing hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen based democracy" (p. 114). This core claim is reinforced in the literature by more specific predictions. Corrado (1996) suggests that the Internet can revive democratic politics by reestablishing a connection between voters and political elites, by providing higher quality information to voters, by opening up the electoral process to a wider range of candidates because of its low cost, and by creating a more participatory political system. Norris (2001) describes these kinds of arguments as mobilization theories that argue that the Internet can mobilize people who are currently on the periphery of the political system. In short, cyber-optimists see computer-mediated communication as democracy's future.

While the cyber-optimist perspective was typical of much of the early literature on the Internet and politics, several more recent analysts could be described as cyber-pessimists or, as Wilhelm (2000, pp. 22-23) describes them, "techno-realists." Richard Davis (1999) is typical of this approach, asserting that the Internet will not fundamentally change the character of the political process by making it more participatory any more than television or radio ushered in a new era of political equality. Davis argues that the Internet will simply provide a new forum for political participation and deliberation for those who are already engaged politically. Throughout his book, Davis demonstrates the ways in which this has been the case in American politics. Norris (2001) classifies these as reinforcement theories, which suggest that the Internet will reinforce existing social and political patterns of dominance.

In its infancy, this debate was largely theoretical and conjectural, but in the last few years, empirical studies of the use of the Internet by political parties, voters, and citizens have proliferated. Most of this research, however, is on the use of the Internet in the American political system. While the United State is undoubtedly a leader in campaign innovations driven by technology, the over-reliance on American evidence makes it difficult to separate the impact of the Internet on politics from the broader context of American politics. In other words, would the Internet have similar effects in a different institutional setting and a different cultural context? In particular, there have been very few empirical examinations of the political impact of the Internet in a Canadian context. The relative lack of study of political uses of the Internet in Canada is unfortunate, as Canadians tend to be among the world leaders in adopting new forms of communications technology. Indeed, Canada is a contender for the title of "most wired" nation in the world. In 2000, Sweden was the only democracy that exceeded Canada's level of Internet use (Norris, 2002, pp. 130-131). Given the sparse population and geographic isolation of many communities in Canada, increased used of the Internet for political communication would seem naturally attractive.

www.candidate.com: Candidate web sites in Alberta and British Columbia
This analysis looks at one aspect of this larger question, namely, the extent to which local candidates are using the Internet in their election campaigns. It will do so through a pair of case studies of the 2001 Alberta and British Columbia provincial elections. These two provinces are excellent candidates for this analysis, because by any measures of Internet use, they have the highest user base in the country (Statistics Canada, 2002). In addition, neither provincial election could be considered a surprise. Ralph Klein and the Alberta Conservatives called the provincial

election for mid-March in 2001, almost exactly four years after the 1997 election. The British Columbia New Democrats put off the 2001 election as long as possible, but the quickly approaching five-year deadline necessitated an election in mid-May. This expectation of the election is an important consideration because an Internet election strategy takes time to prepare. Snap elections limit that time. For example, the federal Conservatives planned a more elaborate web site for the 2000 federal election, but the unexpected election call dashed those plans.[ii2]

The focus of this paper is the web sites created by candidates as part of their local campaigns. Recent research on Canadian political parties has highlighted the importance of local campaigns and party organization in the conduct of elections and for maintaining the vibrancy of Canadian political parties (Carty, 1991; Carty & Eagles, 1998; Carty & Eagles, 1999; Sayers, 1999). The Internet has provided another weapon in the communications arsenal of local candidates. Along with brochures, mass media advertising, lawn signs, and canvassing, local campaigns can now establish web sites to provide information to and persuade potential voters.

While the essential idea of a candidate web site is relatively intuitive, strictly delineating a candidate web site from other web sites involving that person can be difficult. For this analysis, a candidate web site is defined as one under candidate control in which a candidate seeks to persuade voters in a particular constituency to support them with their votes. This obviously excludes non-political web sites involving the candidate, such as personal home pages, or business related sites. More importantly, this definition excludes sites that may have political relevant content, but are not directed at persuading voters for their support.[iii3] This is especially important in the case of sitting MLAs. Increasingly, MLAs create web sites that are intended to provide information about the MLA's activities and government services available to the constituency. Typically, these sites are paid for from the MLA's office budget and thus may not be used for partisan activities such as campaigns.[iv4] Finally, the criterion in the definition that requires these sites to be under the control of the local campaign excludes the parts of the party web site that present the party's local candidates. Usually, each candidate receives a page with a brief biography, a picture, and some contact information. This element of the definition is important because otherwise virtually every candidate in an election running for a major party would have a web site.

This definition made it difficult to analyze the web sites of two of the parties. The Alberta Conservatives made extensive use of standard templates for candidate web sites. Almost half of their candidate web sites followed a standard template created by the party and were hosted on the party's web site. These "template" sites were included in our analysis, because they allowed a degree of customization and the provision of candidate-defined content, something that is often not true of the usual candidate listings on the party web site. Furthermore, these template sites were visually distinct from the party's main web site in the campaign. The British Columbia Liberals also created difficulties because of the degree of customization seen in the candidate section of their main party web site. There were nine standard sections, two of which – volunteer recruitment and donation solicitation – were included for all candidates. Candidates could choose to add a front page, a brief biography, a "get involved" section, local campaign news, a list of upcoming events, a photo album, and a list of contacts. Some added all of the additional elements; some candidates added only very few. Despite this level of customization, these candidate sections were completely integrated into the party web page; these sections were clearly not independent in function or "look

and feel." Consequently, they were not included as candidate web sites, although reference will be made to them in the analysis that follows, as appropriate.

In order to find candidate web sites in both elections, we used a multi-stage search method. In the first stage of our search, we began at party web sites and followed any links provided to local candidate web pages. This technique enabled us to identify the bulk of candidate web sites. We continued to check the party web sites throughout the course of the election, identifying new candidate sites as they were added. The second stage of our search involved searching for candidate names with the Google search engine. Through this, we were able to identify some additional candidate sites. In the final stage of our search, we e-mailed candidates for whom we had an e-mail address but had not found a web site to inquire about the presence of any web site. Throughout the election, we continued to search for web sites for candidates for whom we had not located web sites. On the final weekends of both elections, we used web-mirroring software to download mirror images of the web sites for later analysis.[v5]

Our search strategy was as comprehensive as we could make it, but it had certain limitations. We relied heavily on listings on party web sites and e-mail addresses supplied on them. This means that the analysis may underestimate the number of candidate web sites for those who ran as independents or whose party did not have a party web site. Furthermore, we did not have access to candidate brochures and advertisements that they may have used to steer voters to web sites. Finally, because of the delay in newly developed web sites showing up on search engines, Google searches may not have found some of the candidate sites. Consequently, there is reason to believe that our search strategy may have missed some candidate sites. However, our search strategy is similar to that a voter looking for a particular candidate site might use. A determined voter would likely employ a combination of links from party pages, search engines, and direct e-mail to find a particular candidate's page. A web site that cannot be located using a combination of these methods is essentially "invisible" on-line and probably had dubious political impact. We can thus be reasonably confident that our search strategy identified relevant candidate web sites that may have been visited by voters.

Which candidates had web sites?
Despite the hype over the expansion of the Internet, candidates and political parties have been somewhat hesitant to develop on-line campaign presences. Michael Marzolini (1999), the pollster for the federal Liberals, has expressed doubts about whether there is a sufficient electoral reward to justify the effort of an extensive on-line presence. It is not automatic, therefore, that candidates will create web sites. In Alberta, we found web sites for 80 (or 25.2%) of the 318 candidates. Only 32 (7.0%) of the 456 candidates in British Columbia had candidate web sites. This difference between the provinces is initially puzzling. Both provinces are relatively "wired," and the campaign dynamics of both elections were broadly similar in that the central election outcomes were never in doubt. Yet, Alberta's candidates were far more likely to develop and maintain web sites.

A major part of the explanation for this difference can be seen in Tables One, which breaks down web site creation by province and party. This table clearly demonstrates that every party's candidates were not equally likely to establish web sites. In Alberta, the most successful parties were most likely to establish web sites. The Conservatives – the most successful and resource-rich

party in Alberta – saw nearly half of their candidates establish web sites. The Conservatives' web site dominance is somewhat misleading, however, due to the prevalence of the previously mentioned template sites; these allowed Tory candidates to create web sites with less effort than would otherwise be required. The Liberals were somewhat less likely to establish web sites, followed by the New Democrats. This pattern contradicts one of the hopes of cyber-optimists: that the Internet provides an inexpensive form of campaign communication that might potentially level the playing field (Corrado, 1996, pp. 10-11).

The Alberta pattern was not replicated in British Columbia. The Liberals – the dominant party in the election – had *no* candidate web sites whatsoever. There is a simple explanation for this initially puzzling finding: the Liberals discouraged their candidates from establishing their own web sites.[vi6] In fact, the Liberals went to the extent of registering domain names for their candidates that would redirect to the Liberal main party site. In other words, typing in www.candidatename.com would direct the Internet user not to a site run by that candidate, but to the Liberal party web site. This decision by the Liberals illustrates that the decentralized character of the Internet may not necessarily translate into a decentralized pattern of campaign communication. For the most part, political parties are hierarchical and centralized organizations and Internet communications strategies can be adjusted to fit this character. As noted earlier, the candidate sections of the B.C. Liberal web site allowed some degree of customization, though not to the extent allowed on stand-alone candidate web sites. In any event, the absence of Liberal candidate web sites explains much of the lag between British Columbia and Alberta. The web site numbers for the other B.C. parties are not inconsistent with those in Alberta.

Table One Candidate web sites, by party

Alberta

Party	Number of candidates	Candidates with web sites	% of candidates with web sites
Progressive Conservatives	83	38	45.8%
Liberals	83	22	26.5%
New Democrats	83	15	18.1%
Alberta First	16	2 0	12.5% 0%
Social Credit	12		
Alberta Greens	10	1	10.0%
Communist	2	0	0% 6.9%
Independents	29	2	
Total	**318**	**80**	**25.2%**

British Columbia

Party	Number of candidates	Candidates with web sites	% of candidates with web sites
Liberals	79	0	0%
NDP	79	12	15.2%
Green Party	72	13	18.1%
Unity Party	56	2	3.6%
Marijuana Party	79	2	2.5%
BC Reform	9	3	33.3%
Other parties	82	0	0%
Total	**456**	**32**	**7.0%**

Besides the partisan patterns in establishing web sites, there were also significant regional variations in Internet use. Table Two reports the proportion of candidates from each region within the province that set up candidate web sites.[vii7] One clear pattern emerges: candidate web sites are more common in urban constituencies than in rural areas. This finding is not particularly surprising: major urban areas tend to have higher levels of education and younger residents, both of whom are more likely to be Internet users (Statistics Canada, 2002; Norris, 2001, p. 69). Consequently, there is a richer crop of potential voters in the major urban areas, making a web site a potentially more fruitful campaign strategy. On the other hand, it could be argued that the Internet is a cost-effective way for candidates to campaign across areas that are geographically large and have lower population densities. It takes more resources to campaign in these areas using traditional methods; the Internet is an attractive alternative. These findings suggest, however, that the potential base of Internet users is a more important determinant of candidates using web sites.

Table Two Proportion of candidates with web sites, by party and region

Alberta

Region	PC	Liberal	NDP	Others	Total
Rural	28.6%	14.3%	8.6%	12.5%	**15.4%**
Edmonton	47.6%	28.6%	38.1%	0%	**32.4%**
Calgary	66.7%	47.6%	9.5%	9.1%	**32.9%**
Minor Urban	100.0%	33.3%	33.3%	0%	**43.5%**
Total	**45.8%**	**26.5%**	**18.1%**	**7.2%**	**25.2%**

British Columbia

Region	Liberal	NDP	Green	Others	Total
Fraser Valley	0%	10.3%	22.2%	5.3%	**7.9%**
Victoria	0%	20.0%	40.0%	0.0%	**9.1%**
Other	0%	20.0%	9.7%	1.1%	**5.6%**
Total	**0%**	**15.2%**	**18.1%**	**3.1%**	**7.0%**

The absence of Liberal candidate sites makes it difficult to generalize meaningfully about party appeals to particular regions in that province. The Alberta data, however, are suggestive. The general pattern is for party candidates to create web sites in areas of regional strength. The Conservatives were hoping for a breakthrough in Edmonton in the 2001 election, but their urban base has definitely been Calgary. Two-thirds of Tory candidates in Calgary created candidate web sites. Similarly, the New Democrat candidates in Edmonton were far more likely to create web sites than in Calgary or elsewhere. This is consistent with the traditional targeting of winnable constituencies that characterizes ND campaigns in Alberta. The exception to this pattern is the Liberals: while the two other significant parties played to their strengths, the Liberal candidates in Calgary were far more likely to create web sites than in Edmonton or elsewhere, somewhat surprising considering the dynamics of the election. Only one candidate in Calgary was seen to have a realistic opportunity of winning, while most of the Liberals running in Edmonton were incumbents and certainly were competitive in the 2001 election. Despite this, the Liberal candidates' Internet efforts were concentrated in Calgary.

Brochures in Cyberspace: Web site elements

When we look at what candidates did in their campaign sites, one of the remarkable things is that they are quite similar. Despite the variations in candidate styles, parties, and campaign context, candidate web sites usually contain similar features. Table Three lists common elements on candidate web sites and how frequently they were found in each province. A virtually automatic inclusion on a candidate web site is a brief candidate biography. In both provinces, roughly 90% of candidates included a brief biography of themselves for voters to read. Another common element is a brief set of statements on issues. These usually consist of excerpts from the party's platform. While it was fairly common (particularly in British Columbia) to provide access to the full text of the platform, usually through a direct link to the platform on the party's primary campaign web site, many candidates simply listed a subset of issue positions and statements on their sites, leaving voters to find the complete party platform on their own.

Table Three Major web site elements

Element	% of candidate web sites with this element in:	
	Alberta	British Columbia
Candidate biography	90.0%	90.3%
Statements on issues	76.3%	74.2%
Press releases	23.8%	38.7%
Endorsements	16.3%	3.2%
Calendar of campaign events	31.3%	32.3%
Candidate speeches (text or audio)	3.8%	6.5%
Candidate writing	6.3%	16.1%
Links page	18.8%	32.3%
Photo gallery	11.3%	29.0%
Access to full party platform	21.3%	45.2%

Biographies and brief versions of the party's issue positions are essentially the same material a candidate might include in a brochures as part of their conventional campaign. Elements that make use of the unique features of the Internet, however, are considerably less common on these campaign web pages. The World Wide Web provides an opportunity to archive information for the use of voters or others who might be interested. Some candidates took advantage of this capability. Many candidates put their media releases on the web. It was far less common for candidates to store speeches (either in text or audio form) on-line or to post articles and other examples of candidate writing. Only a couple of candidates did so in Alberta; a few Green party and Marijuana party candidates followed suit in British Columbia. These were exceptional. Another capability of the World Wide Web is that campaign material can be changed as circumstances change. One use of this is to post a calendar of campaign events that is updated regularly; several candidates took advantage of this capability. Some (but relatively few) candidates also developed pages of links of related information.

Essentially, then, many of these campaign web sites are little more than dynamic campaign brochures with the ability to archive past information. Some web sites went beyond this, however, and used their web sites for campaign recruitment and maintenance activities: soliciting volunteers,

funding, and assisting in organization. Table Four indicates how many candidate web sites conducted certain campaign activities. One clear conclusion is that Alberta's candidates went far more innovative in this respect than candidates in British Columbia. While the Conservatives typically led all other parties in Alberta, they are not solely responsible for this; the Alberta Liberals were also more likely to do so than any candidates in British Columbia.

Table Four Campaign Recruitment and Maintenance Activities

Site element	% of candidate web sites using this in:	
	Alberta	British Columbia
On-line donations	35.4%	6.5%
Print donation form and mail in	11.3%	0%
Solicit campaign volunteers	63.8%	22.6%
Sign up for lawn sign	43.8%	6.5%
Invitation to join party	7.5%	9.7%

One of the most intriguing possibilities of the Internet for political campaigning is fundraising. American Senator John McCain, who raised six million dollars on-line during his failed attempt for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000, demonstrated the potential of web-based fundraising for politics. Many of the candidates in Alberta made an effort to raise money on-line, with over a third of those with web sites offering the possibility of on-line donations. Conservative candidates were the most likely to offer this ability, but these numbers are inflated somewhat because most of their template sites had this capability. Even if we exclude those template sites, however, a full 35% of Conservative candidates offered on-line donations; 22.7% of Liberals did so; the New Democrats lagged significantly behind with only 7.1% of their sites offering this capability. New Democrat candidates were more likely to provide a form that donors could fill out and mail in with their donation, rather than on-line donations through a secure server.

In Alberta, the Liberals and Conservatives both sought to recruit volunteers on their web sites: roughly three-quarters of the web sites for each party tried to find campaign workers this way. By contrast, only one-third of NDP candidate web sites did so. This is an interesting contrast and reflects the differing characters of the two parties. As discussed earlier, NDP web sites in Alberta tended to be found in areas where the party had better electoral prospects, presumably places where the party is better organized. This reticence to recruit volunteers on-line is thus consistent with the NDP's character as a mass party. These types of parties tend to rely on a committed core of volunteers with extensive ties to the party between elections (Sayers, 1999, chapter 5). The fact that BC candidates were less likely to recruit volunteers on-line is also consistent with the fact that the two parties that created the bulk of the candidate web sites in the 2001 provincial election – the Greens and the NDP – can be characterized as mass parties. By contrast, the B.C. Liberals solicited volunteers for their local campaigns on each and every candidate section of their main party web site. Surprisingly, they used a secure server to do this, but did not provide this facility for on-line donations. Alberta's candidates also gave people the opportunity to sign up for lawn signs on-line. Again, the Conservatives dominated this activity, but nearly half of the Liberals provided this option as well. In British Columbia, only two NDP candidate sites had this capability.

It would seem, then, that for the most part campaign web sites were merely more dynamic electronic versions of campaign brochures. Most of the candidate web sites did a capable job of

presenting basic information about the candidate such as biographies and summaries of issue positions. Many candidates – particularly in Alberta – went a bit beyond that and used the Internet to coordinate campaigning with voters through on-line fund-raising and solicitation of volunteers. For the most part, though, candidate web sites were virtual brochures and displayed little innovation in using the Web for campaign purposes.

Multimedia, Interactivity, and Linking: Using the Properties of the Web
The metaphor of virtual campaign brochures, it could be argued, does not fully capture the nature of the Internet. What makes the World Wide Web a potentially powerful medium is its combination of text, graphics, video, and sound to provide a complete multimedia experience. Furthermore, the Internet is not simply a passive medium: it is interactive, allowing users to shape the content they receive and to interact directly with others, including candidates and their campaigns. In addition, the use of hypertext on the World Wide Web allows sites to link to one another in a way that integrates a particular site into a larger network. As we shall see, in the case of these candidate web sites, however, the brochure metaphor is an apt one, as few sites take advantage of these unique characteristics of Internet communication.

There was very little multimedia content on campaign sites in these two elections. As Table Five shows, the graphic content was almost exclusively static. One of the more surprising findings is how little party logos are used on candidate web sites. A breakdown by party reveals that a significant reason for this is the apparent desire of some candidates to distance themselves from the party for which they were running. One party in each province was especially prone to this type of behaviour. In Alberta, almost 90% of Conservatives included the PC logo on their site, along with 73.3% of New Democrats. Only 45.5% of Liberal candidates included the party logo on their sites. It would seem that the stigma of being a Liberal in Alberta has not completely dissipated. A similar pattern can be seen in British Columbia. Of the two parties with significant numbers of web sites, Green candidates (69.3%) were far more likely to include the party logo on their sites than NDP candidates (27.3%). This is true even though the Greens are a less established party; it seems clear that NDP candidates were trying to distance themselves to some extent from an unpopular partisan affiliation.

Table Five Use of multimedia in candidate sites

Site technology	% of candidate web sites using this in:	
	Alberta	**British Columbia**
Party logo graphic	71.3%	61.3%
Photographs	93.8%	100.0%
Of candidate alone	92.5%	100.0%
Of candidate with leader	16.3%	12.9%
Of candidate with family	33.8%	19.4%
Of candidate with voters	27.5%	25.8%
Of leader alone	31.3%	9.7%
Flash splash page	1.3%	6.3%
Video clips	5.0%	6.5%
Audio clips	5.0%	3.3%
PDF files	11.3%	9.7%

Photographs were a nearly universal feature of candidate web sites, although five of the candidate sites in Alberta had no photographs at all (every BC web site had photos). By far, the most common photo was a solo pose of the candidate; nearly every web site had one. Photographs of the candidate interacting with voters were the next most common, but these are especially widespread among candidates running for the governing party. Almost half of the Alberta PC sites had pictures with voters; nearly three-quarters of BC NDP sites contained similar photographs. Party leaders were also favorite subjects for photos, particularly in Alberta. The Conservatives were particularly likely to portray their leader on their web sites: nearly half of the web sites had a picture of Ralph Klein on his own; a quarter of candidate sites had a picture of the candidate with Klein. By contrast, Alberta Liberals shied away from portraying their leader. Only 13.6% of the sites had a picture of Nancy MacBeth alone; the same proportion had a picture of the candidate with MacBeth. This reflects the extent to which the Alberta Conservatives' electoral success is built around Ralph Klein's appeal to voters and MacBeth's relative lack of appeal. In British Columbia, only the NDP featured their leader with any frequency, but even then, it was just in a handful of web sites. Finally, photographs with family were more common in Alberta, but this is due exclusively to the fondness of Conservative candidates for portraying their families. While nearly half of the Alberta Tory candidates portrayed themselves with family members, New Democrats and Liberals did so in proportions similar to those among BC candidates.

While party logos and photographs add some graphic splash to web sites, they are essentially static and consistent with the brochure metaphor. These features were fairly common; more elaborate uses of multimedia were not. Only a few candidates used animated "splash pages," that are displayed with Macromedia's Flash program. A few used video and audio. More, but still a decisive minority, used PDF files that can be read by Adobe's Acrobat reader to disseminate pre-formatted material, such as brochures. These were the exceptions. Relatively few web sites in either province could truly be described as multimedia. Based on the experiences in Alberta and British Columbia, we have to conclude that this distinctive feature of the Internet as a communications medium has yet to influence on-line campaigns in any significant way. The reluctance of candidates to use these is somewhat understandable, however. In the first place, while creating a web site that uses graphics, text, and photos is relatively simple, incorporating video, audio, and Flash animations is considerably more difficult and resource-intensive. Second, many voters may lack the knowledge to access this content. Typically, all of these features require the installation and configuration of various plug-ins. Over-reliance on these may make the site difficult to use.[viii8] Finally, most home users continue to access the Internet through dial-up telephone lines and modems.[ix9] Multimedia features tend to be bandwidth intensive and require broadband access to be viewed effectively at home. As broadband access becomes more prevalent, it is likely we will see increased used of these technologies in election campaigns.

The multimedia aspects of the World Wide Web are certainly novel, but the defining feature of the Internet as a medium is interactivity. While the development of radio and television certainly had significant impacts on the nature of the political process and campaigning, they are all similar to printed material in that the information flows all go one way: from broadcaster to viewer/listener/reader. What sets the Internet apart from other forms of communications media is its ability to allow voters to interact with candidates and other public officials and, even more

profoundly, with each other.[x10] While the basic idea of interactivity is quite intuitive, defining it precisely is considerably more difficult (van Dijk, 2000, p. 47). Stromer-Galley (2000) points out that by definition the web is, to a certain extent, inherently interactive, in the sense that users can use their mouse to pick and choose which content they receive. When we talk about interactivity in this context, however, we are interested in interaction between people that is computer mediated, or what she calls "deep interactivity" (p. 117). Table Six reports how frequently candidate web sites provided this kind of interactivity on their sites.

Certain forms of interactivity were fairly common in both elections. The vast majority of candidates provided some way to contact the candidate on-line. Most commonly, this was done through a "mailto" link on the web page. Clicking on this link initiates the user's email client and allows them to send e-mail to the candidate or his or her staff. Also prevalent was the use of a form to send a message to the campaign. These were fairly common in Alberta, where almost half of the candidate sites made use of this technology. The use of forms is interesting because it provides a solution to a potential problem with the use of the Internet in local campaigns. Candidates' campaigns are trying to persuade a geographically defined set of voters to support them. The Internet, by contrast, is not bounded by geography. Campaigns do not want to waste time responding to voters outside the constituency. Requiring certain information on forms is a way of filtering out non-constituents. Of the 39 Alberta candidate sites[xi11] with forms, 26 required the voter to disclose a phone number, e-mail address, street address, and postal code. Only three sites required an e-mail address alone for a response. Most candidate web sites also provided conventional contacts for the candidates and his or her campaign as well.

Table Six Interactivity on Candidate Web Sites

Site technology	% of candidate web sites using this in:	
	Alberta	**British Columbia**
Way to contact candidate on-line	93.8%	83.9%
Other contact information for candidate	93.8%	80.6%
Ask the candidate a question	3.8%	6.6%
On-line survey	3.8%	0%
Message board/forum	1.3%	3.3%
Guest book	3.8%	0%
Mailing list	3.8%	0%

While qualifying as "deep interactivity," these opportunities to contact candidates by email or web-based form are at best only very rudimentary forms of interactivity. Arguably, they are more *re*active than interactive in that they invite users to respond to the information posted without affecting its content. There are, however, a few well-established ways of incorporating user content on a web site; what is striking is how little candidates used them in either province. For example, a couple of sites provided an opportunity for users to draft questions for candidates; the questions and answers would then be posted on the site later. A couple of candidates also incorporated on-line polls that invite users to respond to a question by choosing from one of several options. While both of these are somewhat more interactive than simply soliciting contact, they also constrain the ability of users to structure the site's content. The web designer can choose which questions and answers he or she posts on-line; by structuring the question and available responses, web designers can

shape the outcome of the survey. Even these very limited forms of interactivity were hardly used by candidates.

Guest books and message boards provide more profound opportunities for interaction. Depending on the software, guest books allow users to write a short greeting and have it automatically appear on the site. Message boards allow the most complete form of interactivity in a campaign context. On a message board, voters can communicate directly with each other, not just with the candidate (Jansen & Koop, 2002). A couple of candidates in Alberta used guest books and one candidate in each province provided message boards. This type of interactivity was virtually absent on the Alberta and BC candidate sites.

The lack of interactivity is perhaps the most significant failure of campaigns to embrace the unique features of the Internet. There is a certain level of incompatibility between the Internet and campaign communication on this point. Campaigns are largely about carefully controlling communications to present a consistent message (Davis, 1999, pp. 96-97); allowing real interactivity opens the possibility that users might post messages that campaigns do not like. Whatever the advisability of interactivity from a democratic standpoint, it is likely not in the interests of most campaigns. Furthermore, as with multimedia, providing real forms of interaction requires increased technical skills, and greater resources than a rudimentary site with text and graphics. For many candidates, the pay-off may not justify the investment in all of this technology. Finally, the forums on those candidate sites that actually provide them are typically used only sparingly, suggesting that voters are perhaps not as interested in interactivity as democratic theorists might like them to be.

One puzzling omission, however, is the relative lack of use of mailing lists by local campaigns. Many provincial and national campaigns use mailing lists to provide periodic messages to supporters, but relatively few candidates provide an option to sign up for such a list on their sites. Only two candidates in Alberta (and none in British Columbia) bothered to provide this option. This is surprising because it provides another opportunity to connect with voters and supporters: the flow of information is one-way, so there are no problems controlling the message. Furthermore, establishing a mailing list is a technologically simple and inexpensive. In the United States, targeted mailing lists have become a popular tool for on-line campaigns (Foot, Schneider, & Xenos, 2002).

The final unique characteristic of the World Wide Web is the ability to link to other sites. Most sites had at least one link to another site, but this feature of the Web was not as widely used as might be expected. Table Seven lists the most common link destinations for candidate web sites. Virtually every candidate site linked to the provincial party site with which they were affiliated. This stands in marked contrast to the American experience where only a minority of candidates linked to party sites (Foot, Schneider, & Xenos, 2002, Table 5). Relatively few candidate sites linked to a federal party site, however, indicating the extent to which provincial party politics in these two provinces have become detached from federal party politics. Beyond that, there are few consistent linking patterns. Candidates linked to a smattering of government web sites, but little else. Some candidates linked to various interest groups, but typically no single interest group received more than a couple of links from candidates. One surprising finding is that candidates rarely linked to the web sites of fellow candidates who might be running in the same area.

Table Seven Links to other sites

Link to:	% of candidate web sites linking here in:	
	Alberta	British Columbia
Provincial party	81.3%	77.4%
Federal party	2.5%	12.9%
Electoral Officer site	7.5%	12.9%
Provincial legislature	8.1%	0%
Provincial government site	11.3%	0%
Federal government site	1.3%	0%
Local government site	8.8%	3.2%
Other candidates in party	2.5%	6.5%
Opposing candidates	0%	0%

The relative reticence of candidate web sites to take advantage of this elementary feature of the World Wide Web can be explained simply: linking gives users the ability to leave the site easily, perhaps not to return. Since one of the goals of campaigning is to control the message, external links allows users to escape the controlled confines of the web site. This naturally explains why none of the candidates linked to any of their opponents.

This survey of the use of (or, more accurately, the lack thereof) the distinctive features of the Internet in campaign web sites suggests that few web sites are using the medium to its full potential. Very few of the web sites could be described as multimedia, fewer still offered true opportunities for interaction, and very few took advantage of the most elementary characteristic of the Web: its hypertext ability to link to other sites. Most candidate web sites in the two elections were little more than electronic versions of campaign brochures.

Did candidate web sites make a difference?
While some candidates contest elections to advance arguments and to promote a particular policy agenda, most candidates are in elections for a simple reason: to win. Most attempts to communicate with the electorate are, therefore, driven by this basic imperative. Candidates want to maximize the votes they receive. Presumably, the more ways they connect with voters, the more likely it is that they will have persuaded voters to support them. Ultimately, from a campaign point of view, a successful web site would be one that persuaded a voter to support a candidate that they would not have supported had they not visited the site.

Assessing whether candidate web sites appreciably increased vote shares is fraught with difficulty. This is especially true in these cases where there are no survey data available that compare the voting behaviour of candidates with their web browsing habits. Without access to this, we are left with aggregate data. Table Eight is a rudimentary attempt to assess whether candidates with web sites earned higher vote shares than candidates without web sites. There is an obvious problem with causality here: it is entirely plausible that candidates who have significant electoral support also have greater access to resources that would enable them to create a web site in the first place. Thus, high voter support may be leading candidates to create web sites, rather than the reverse. This question is impossible to answer definitively with these data.

Table Eight Impact of candidate web sites on vote shares

Alberta

Region	Party		
	PC	**Liberal**	**NDP**
Rural	No site: 68.7% Site: 66.4%	No site: 20.1% Site: 24.9%	No site: 5.9% Site: 6.4%
Edmonton	No site: 47.0% Site: 44.7%	No site: 37.8% Site: 41.0%	No site: 11.7% Site: 19.8%
Calgary	No site: 70.2% Site: 68.1%	No site: 22.3% Site: 25.2%	No site: 5.6% Site: 7.3%
Minor Urban	No site: N/A Site: 54.8%	No site: 36.3% Site: 33.0%	No site: 4.4% Site: 12.0%

British Columbia

Region	Party	
	NDP	**Green**
Fraser Valley	*No site: 20.0%* *Site: 34.0%*	No site: 13.3% Site: 12.5%
Victoria	No site: 29.5% Site: 36.9%	No site: 17.7% Site: 20.0%
Other	No site: 20.8% Site: 20.1%	No site: 10.8% Site: 18.5%

Italics: one-tailed t-test significant at 0.05 level

Taken as a whole, Table Eight provides little evidence that candidate web sites contributed much to a candidate's electoral prospects. In a majority of the cases in the table, candidates with web sites did marginally better than candidates without web sites. Most of these differences are slight, however; indeed, the only statistically significant difference in support levels was found among NDP candidates in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. This may reflect the general robustness of the campaign. Candidates organized enough to develop and maintain web sites are presumably running more generally effective campaigns any way.

While this is obviously an unsophisticated test of the impact of a candidate web site, there is good reason to believe that web sites would not contribute much to a candidate's election chances. Web sites differ from other forms of campaigning in a significant way: voters have to choose to go to the web sites; web sites do not come to them. Most other forms of campaign contact can be initiated by the campaign: brochures, phone calls, canvassing, newspaper, radio, or television advertising. Web sites are fundamentally different. The people who might visit a campaign web site likely have high levels of political interest and information and, as such, are not likely to have their predispositions altered by the site's content. On the other hand, people who are less interested – and, likely, less informed – and, thus, more susceptible to the persuasive messages of the web site, are probably not going to visit the web site to begin with.[xii12] Without being able to "push" content onto users' computers, the vote impact of web sites may be somewhat limited, as the web sites either are visited seen by users, "preach to the converted," or fall upon deaf ears.

Conclusion

British Columbia and Alberta are exactly the kinds of places we might expect to see Internet campaigning come of age: both provinces have young, well educated, affluent, and urbanized populations. The evidence from the 2001 provincial elections suggests that the Internet age has not significantly altered the campaign trail yet. Although many candidates did go through the trouble of creating them, their limited use suggests that these are campaign extras, and not yet central to the campaign effort.

When we look at what candidates did on their web sites, we find a surprising degree of "sameness." Essentially, candidate web sites were digital versions of campaign brochures. Many candidates in Alberta did try to use their sites to solicit donations, volunteers, and lawn signs, which suggests an attempt to broaden the uses of campaign web sites. There is little evidence that candidates used many of the defining characteristics of the Internet as a medium: multimedia, interactivity, and linking. These things that set the Internet apart from traditional media were little used by candidates.

The evidence from Alberta and British Columbia tends to reinforce the argument that the Internet represents "politics as usual." The unwillingness of candidates to embrace the distinctive features of this new medium may reflect the fact that communications strategies for political parties tend to be drafted by people skilled in the traditional media; the broadcast paradigm will not die easily. More seriously, though, there is a certain degree of incompatibility between the Internet as a medium and the nature of campaigns. Campaigns want to win: controlling the message is crucial to that endeavour. On-line interaction simply exposes the campaign message to unwanted scrutiny. Candidates have thus been reluctant to play this game, and thus exclude those elements from their sites.

This is not to say that the Internet will never spark campaign innovations, but only that as of 2001, there is little evidence that local campaigns had fully grasped the potential of the Internet as medium for communications with voters. The World Wide Web is still relatively new and an emerging medium. As broadband access becomes more common, and as parties and candidates get more familiar with the potential of the Internet, we may yet see the emergence of real innovation on the campaign trail.

About the Author

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Notes

[i] 1. Hacker and van Dijk (2000), Wilhelm (2000), and Norris (2001) all provide useful overviews of the literature.

[ii] 2. Reported on http://www.canoe.ca, 12 November 2000.

[iii] 3 For example, a Marijuana party candidate in British Columbia had a web site extolling the virtues of marijuana use, but it made no direct mention of the election.

[iv] 4 In addition, we excluded a web site of a Green candidate in the British Columbia election that was leftover from his 2000 federal election campaign; it had not been updated and addressed federal, rather than provincial issues.

[v] 5 Due to an unforeseen software problem, the site of one NDP candidate in British Columbia was not downloaded in its entirety and is thus excluded from much of the subsequent analysis.

[vi] 6 This was confirmed in e-mail exchanges with several Liberal candidates. The Liberal party campaign web site had individual web pages for each candidate that allowed a degree of customization. Visually, however, these pages were clearly part of the party web page and, therefore, excluded from the analysis.

[vii] 7 In Alberta, Edmonton includes neighboring suburbs, such as St. Albert and Sherwood Park. The "minor urban" category includes constituencies in Fort McMurray, Red Deer, Lethbridge, and Medicine Hat. In British Columbia, the "Fraser Valley" category includes urban and suburban constituencies as far east as Abbotsford, while Victoria includes all constituencies in the Greater Victoria area.

[viii] 8 Carty, Cross, and Young (2000, p. 207) discuss this problem with respect to the 1997 federal Conservative campaign web site.

[ix] Despite the rapid growth in cable and other broadband connections, Statistics Canada (2002) reports that 70% of Internet home connections continue to use modems and telephone lines.

[x] 10 E.C. Kamarck (1999, p. 114) states that interactivity is "the feature of the web that gives it superiority over television."

[xi] 11 There were too few sites using forms in British Columbia to permit a meaningful analysis.

[xii] 12 Zaller (1992, chapter 3) refers to these phenomena as the resistance axiom and the reception axiom.